The revolution now

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This little essay is about urgency, but it is about calm urgency, unhurried urgency. It is about the need for educators such as myself to be now what we must be tomorrow. It was written for a conference at Brockwood Park school.

Responsibility

The challenge for me as a university teacher is how I approach the question of the burden of responsibility I hand to my students. I am taking it that the same challenge might be felt by all educators, at least all those who think seriously about education, such as those at Brockwood; but is felt most acutely by those engaged in the work of disrupting, of making dis-ease, dis-quiet, and dis-contentment.

Contrary to the spirit of Krishnamurti, much education in schools in England, and a fair bit in universities involves telling and explaining. Such teaching and lecturing can be conscious or unconscious. It can be aware of its violence or not. Teaching can be precisely *violent* when it breaks open complacencies, prejudices and unquestioned assumptions. I ask whether such violence is an inevitability, whether all education worthy of its name, that which unsettles and disequilibriates, is an act of violence upon the mind?

When educators take seriously the potential violence of our own activity, we also need to be mindful of the responsibilities with which we burden our students. I have said ‘burden’, not just to be provocative, but to give a sense of how difficult it is to be left wondering, dissatisfied and uncertain without an obvious means of enacting or performing that

uncertainty in a world of certain truths. How can one be uncertain about capitalism in a world of commodities? How can one be uncertain about endless consumption in a world tired and drained by the ceaseless depletion of its limited resources?

I have said 'responsibility' because uncertainty of this type asks of the learner this question: will you be passive in your uncertainty, or will you be active? Will you withdraw from the world, into the monastery of the mind, or will you find a way to wriggle through the cracks in the certainty of the society about you, stretch out and widen those gaps? For as Leonard Cohen says "there is a crack, a crack in everything: that's how the light gets in".

I take as my example, something which is close to my heart, the issue of how we educate for and in a biosphere that is so damaged as to look increasingly irreparable, a planet which has seen the total population of one species – ours – double in the last 40 years (Starr, 2015), and the global population of all wild fauna halve in the same period (WWF, 2014). Many formerly biodiverse ecosystems have become so hollowed out, their interconnections so cauterised as to bring into question their survival over the medium term.

It is harder to feel the loss of biodiversity than it is to feel one's own hair and nails grow; it is harder to feel the gradual death of one's ecosystem than it is to feel one's own slow dying. However, once you have been made more intensely aware of your body in progressive decay, or once learning has taken place which brings you into a closer awareness of the collapse in biodiversity and the malfunctioning of your own biotic life support systems, you have the *responsibility of choice* as to how you respond.

Awareness

Our education works systematically against awareness. The philosopher Baird Callicott, said of the great ecological thinker, planter of the seeds of ecocentric ethics, Aldo Leopold, that for him, our education is, for the most part, "a process of trading awareness for things of lesser worth" (Callicott, 1989, p.226). In schools, when we trade in our awareness, we do so for book-learning, for facts and knowledge which comes between us and the immediacy of our experience.

So, even when education is necessarily about telling, and explaining, this teaching can be done in the 'now' with an awareness of its meaning, or it can be done unthinkingly, it can be done consciously or unconsciously.

When one teaches about our relationship with nature, whether that teaching occurs inside or without the classroom, it can be conducted with, or in the absence of an awareness of the responsibility it places on the student right now in relation to her thinking. It can acknowledge that, as far as our future on the planet goes, "the future is now", or it can say "have these facts, regurgitate them another day."

Those of us who try to be aware of ourselves and our learners as we teach, attempt to avoid alighting upon a perch, but continue unceasingly to wheel above the certainty, asking ourselves what we can all do – teachers and learners together – today, to speed the advance of the cracks in the fossil fuel culture of fast-burn capitalism, for this is a world of 'madness'.

Among his last work, Krishnamurti's reflections on nature feature prominently, and often take the form of little word paintings and sketches, interspersed with philosophical and spiritual ruminations. Krishnamurti's last journal (Krishnamurti, 1987) starts with a reflection upon the ancient hills around his place of residence in California, and their fragile ecosystems "wherever you go…man is destroying nature, cutting down trees to build more houses, polluting the air with cars and industry." (Krishnamurti, 1987, p.14) He calls this 'madness' and asks "Do you know the world is mad, that all this is madness..? And you will grow up to fit into this. Is this right, is this what education is meant for, that you should willingly or unwillingly fit into this structure called society?" (Ibid.) The reflections in this text seem to grow out of their environment, out of the Californian hills, they are attentive to the place within which they are set. In each case they turn from outward attentiveness to meditative inward attentiveness, and back outwards to the responsibilities of the learner and the teacher:

> "There is a tree and we have been watching it day after day for several days…If you establish a relationship with it then you have relationship with mankind. You are responsible then for that tree and for the trees of the world. But if you have no relationship with the living things on this earth you may lose whatever relationship you have with humanity" (Ibid., p.9)
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> "[T]he healing of the mind… gradually takes place if you are with nature, with that orange on the tree, that blade of grass that pushes

> through the cement, and the hills covered, hidden by the clouds. This is not sentiment or romantic imagination but a reality of a relationship with everything that lives and moves on the earth." (Ibid., p.10)

> "It is our intention… to create an environment, a climate, where one can bring about, if it is at all possible, a new human being…To live is to be related. There is no right relationship to anything if there is not the right feeling for beauty, a response to nature" (Ibid., p.89)

So, he turns for the source of his transformative pedagogical vision to images of unsullied nature,

> "So, look at nature, at the tamarind tree, the mango trees is bloom, and listen to the birds early in the morning and late in the evening… See all the colours, the light on the leaves, the beauty of the land, the rich earth. Then having seen that and seen also what the world is, with all its brutality, violence, ugliness, what are you going to do?" (Ibid., p.13)

Insofar as his approach calls for 'attention' rather than 'critique' in a conventional sense, 'looking' rather than analysing, it is amenable to a non-interventionist (at times even anti-interventionist) pedagogy of nature. In this respect Krishnamurti's distinctive contribution to thinking about this question has proved very attractive to many of my students for the ways they can bring his ideas to those of contemporary writers such as Michael Bonnett (2013) and find echoes in the current concerns about scientism in the curriculum - an aggressive interventionism in education about environments which seeks only to measure and quantify. Krishnamurti's last journal as a text for undergraduate students of education raises questions and provokes dialogue that few other books might. But how and when to use it - these are important questions, and my responsibility as an educator.

Krishnamurti (ibid., p.60) speaks of a war on nature and on humanity, of mankind's self-destruction alongside the destruction of the earth. From him, my students learn that integration of the human into humanity and our integration into nature are inseparable.

> "It is our earth, not yours or mine or his… But man has divided the earth, hoping thereby that in the particular he is going to find happiness, security, a sense of abiding comfort." (Ibid., p.60)

> "One never appreciates the earth unless one really lives with it, puts one's hand in the dust, lifting big rocks and stones – one never knows the extraordinary sense of being with the earth, the flowers, the gigantic trees and the strong grass and the hedges along the road." (Ibid., p.71)

Integration into nature *is* integration into humanity: "If you are in harmony with nature, with all the things around you then you are in harmony with all human beings. If you have lost your relationship with nature you will inevitably lose your relationship with human beings." (Krishnamurti, 1987, p.107)

So what does this 'harmony with nature' consist in? And how can education help to bring it about? Krishnamurti's holistic pedagogy shares with that of Bonnett (2013) something of a natural suspicion for the pre-eminence of science as contributory to environmental and social crises, and with Orr's (1994) writing, a worry about the misuses of scientific 'cleverness'; but unlike Bonnett or Orr, he places particular emphasis upon what one might call (individual) spiritual education as an ecologically healing force. "[E]ducation is the cultivation of the whole brain, not one part of it…Science is what has brought about the present state of tension in the world for it has put together through knowledge the most destructive instrument[s] that man has ever known." (Ibid., p.125)

In the beauty of the pedagogical revelation of nature, Krishnamurti finds something akin to the realisation of global consciousness. The loss or, alternatively, the explosion of self into the cosmos, or nature is reflected in Krishnamurti's analogy in this passage from one of his last talks in India in late 1985:

> "With the grandeur, the majesty of a mountain or a lake, or that river early in the morning making a golden path, for a second you've forgotten everything. That is, when the self is not, there is beauty… Like a child with a toy, as long as the toy is complex and he plays with it, the toy absorbs him, takes him over… We are also like that… We are absorbed by the mountain… for a few minutes; then we go back to our own world." (Krishnamurti, 1988, p.73)

Krishnamurti charges that if one doesn't understand the nature of this question – perhaps the same question posed by ecological educators from Leopold's 'thinking like a mountain' (Leopold, 1949, p. 129) onwards – it is because one has *too much* knowledge: rather, one should be *simple*, for "[i]f you are very simple, deeply simple in yourself, you will discover something extraordinary." (Ibid.) Simplicity, awareness, discontentment: these take us back to the question

of what we each individually do when we “go back to our own world” after the lesson from nature or from the conscious educator, to “create a new culture, a totally different kind of existence, not based on consumerism” (ibid.).

When I bring my undergraduate students from an ordinary UK university to Brockwood Park school, I am aware that for some the shock of difference, of radical unfamiliarity with the openness of an enquiry based learning is an act of violence upon their accumulated and settled sense of themselves, and perhaps of their place in nature. Yet, for many, I know it is also a revelation the significance of which is only realised years later. One of my many students who visited Brockwood before going on to teach in a British state school later said, "I wish I could go back there now. Because of experiences like that, I can never wholly believe in or commit myself to the fixed answers or the measurable progress our current system requires me to demonstrate." It is indeed, a huge responsibility to 'burden' another with such uncertainty, whether in relation to education, or to our relation to nature; yet in both cases, such a transformation is urgent. It is the necessary revolution now.

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